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Chinese Army Needs Years to Catch U.S., Soviets, CIA Asserts

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A CIA report released yesterday said it will take China a long time to catch up to the United States and Soviet Union in military strength, even though the Chinese army is the largest in the world.

"In spite of progress to date, China remains a poorly developed nation," the CIA said. "The major constraints on more rapid defense modernization are economic and technological."

The CIA study, which was included in a report released by Congress' Joint Economic Committee, said economic progress eventually will benefit the Chinese military.

"But in the absence of large-scale foreign assistance, which we believe unlikely, limited resources and competing demands throughout the economy will require that force modernization be gradual and spread over an extended period of time," the report said.

China's armed forces manpower is estimated to be as high as 8.3 million. It also has nuclear weapons, including medium- and long-range missiles capable of reaching the Soviet Union — but not the continental United States.

The committee's partially censored report stems from several closed hearings on China and the Soviet Union held last summer. Defense and intelligence officials testified.

Citing China's "weak technological basis," the CIA noted most of China's "few aging scientists" were trained abroad in the 1950s and that the few new weapons being developed compare at best to Soviet technology of the early 1960s.

The Chinese are now looking for western weapons and technology, but have not acquired new weapons systems.

One of the witnesses at the 1979 hearing was CIA director Stansfield Turner. He said "imprudent economic adventures in years past" caused the Chinese to fall behind the rest of the developed world economically and technologically.

And Turner characterized China's combat performance against Vietnam in early 1979 as "workmanlike but unspectacular." The Chinese invaded, then withdrew from, Vietnam last year to halt what they called Vietnamese border violations.

In a statement on the report, Sen. William Proxmire, D-Wis., said the CIA study refutes those who believe China's huge military is equal or superior to that of the United States.

Such a conclusion, Proxmire said, "would obviously be ridiculous but similar mistakes have become fashionable in comparisons of Soviet and U.S. defense programs."

He argued that not only Chinese but also Soviet technological and economic inferiority is often overlooked by proponents of higher U.S. defense spending.